



NDI/CEPPS Quarterly Report: April 1 to June 30, 2005

AZERBAIJAN: Strengthening Political Parties and Civil Society Organizations

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I. SUMMARY

Azerbaijan's prospects for democratic reform improved little this quarter. The government of Azerbaijan issued public pronouncements of its intent to reform the country's election processes, but its statements mainly reiterated rights enshrined in the constitution and were not followed by concrete actions. Political parties, international organizations, and domestic civic organizations continue to face government interference and obstruction. Still they are preparing for the November 2005 parliamentary elections, and the Institute continues to assist them in doing so. This quarter, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted programs for domestic monitoring organizations, parliamentary candidates, political party leaders, independent political activists and women.

The Institute's programs in Azerbaijan seek to promote a transparent election process, promote dialogue on policy issues, assist political parties to grow in size and influence, and encourage women to be more involved in decision making processes. NDI had limited success this quarter in achieving these objectives. Opposition parties united in a coalition to coordinate their parliamentary campaigns, and the Institute's policy discussion forums and women's programs have promoted policy dialogue. The Election Monitoring Center (EMC), with NDI's assistance, has begun to organize a nationwide domestic monitoring effort. NDI plans to continue and intensify these activities in the next quarter as the elections near.

II. BACKGROUND

Ilham Aliyev succeeded his father Heydar as president of Azerbaijan following a deeply flawed election process in October 2003. Since that time, the government of Azerbaijan has persisted in intimidating and harassing its critics. Civic organizations and political parties are still prevented from organizing in several regions, and the government has failed to pass meaningful changes to the election law that would bring it in line with international standards.

President Aliyev recently introduced a number of superficial reform measures. Amendments to the election code that passed through parliament were of a technical nature, and were criticized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Venice Commission of the Council of Europe for failing to address pivotal issues such as the composition of election commissions and restrictions on domestic monitoring organizations. The President's May 11 decree calling for conditions to allow free and fair elections was violated just days later, when the government violently repressed an opposition rally.

Azerbaijan will hold single-mandate parliamentary elections in fall 2005. The switch from proportional to single-mandate elections requires that parties campaign intensely at the district level, and choose candidates to compete in each of 125 jurisdictions. Opposition parties and independent candidates have begun uniting to coordinate parliamentary campaigns. Among the election blocs that have formed are the Azadliq (Freedom) Bloc, made up of three major opposition parties – the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP), the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) and Musavat – and the Yeni Siyaset (New Policy or YeS) Bloc, made up of independent candidates, the Azerbaijan National Independence Party (ANIP), and other parties. The Azadliq Bloc has to date selected 34 candidates and is seeking NDI's advice and assistance on how best to proceed during the campaign period. The YeS Bloc and the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) are expected to announce their candidates for parliament over the summer, at which point NDI will begin working with them more directly.

Since 1995, the Institute has worked with Azerbaijan's major political parties to assist them in becoming more competitive and to develop the skills required to function within a semi-closed political system. NDI has implemented training programs for the governing Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) and the main democratic opposition political parties, including the APFP, ANIP, ADP, and the Musavat Party. NDI's relationship with YAP and the government became strained in the summer of 2003, when YAP party members were forbidden by government officials from participating in NDI trainings. The Institute was itself refused an invitation to monitor the October 2003 presidential election. Since then, NDI has made numerous overtures both to the national government and YAP, issuing invitations to government leaders and ruling party members to participate in its programming. These offers have been ignored.

Over the years, NDI has worked with three civic organizations. For the Sake of Civil Society (FSCS), which NDI helped create in 1997, acted as a multi-partisan domestic monitoring and civic education organization. The Organization for Protection of Women's Rights (OPWR) is a nonpartisan grassroots organization that seeks to advance the social, economic and political rights of women. NDI has also worked closely with the Election Monitoring Center (EMC), a coalition of 15 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working to build civil society. Although FSCS has shifted its focus away from monitoring and OPWR has developed greater financial independence, NDI continues to involve all three groups in the Institute's programming.

NDI's objectives under this project include: the further development of political parties; the promotion of dialogue among political parties, NGOs and government officials aimed at the adoption and implementation of reform legislation and policies; the training of election observers to monitor and report on all aspects of the election process; and the encouragement of women's participation in decision-making processes.

NDI's programs in Azerbaijan correspond to USAID/Caucasus strategic objective 2.1, "Civil Society Better Organized and Represented," and the Intermediate Results 2.1.1, "Issue-based formal and informal associations/advocacy groups organized and active," 2.1.1.1, "Improved capacity for public outreach and advocacy," and 2.1.1.2, "Improved organizational management," 2.1.2.2 "Adoption and implementation of key laws and policies," and 2.1.2.3, "Increased public awareness of legal, policy, and political advocacy framework."

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Political Party Strengthening

Despite obstacles to their development, political parties in Azerbaijan have begun preparing for the November 2005 parliamentary elections. The Institute continues to encourage like-minded parties to pool their resources to coordinate their campaigns by selecting candidates in consultation with one another. This quarter, NDI conducted consultations with party leaders of the Azadliq and Yeni Siyaset Blocs, and continued its program to train regional political party members and independent candidates in Baku.

Party and Candidate Training

This quarter, NDI concluded its training program for regional party members on basic campaign skills. The seminars combined group discussions, individual consultations, distribution of printed materials and practical exercises. The first portion of each seminar was spent reviewing lessons from past sessions to provide a basic starting point from which to build on participants' knowledge.

From April 22-27, ANIP, APFP and Musavat sent 25 party members from five regional centers – Guba, Sumgayit, Sheki, Jalilabad, and Ganja – to Baku for training on message development and delivery. The first half of the training consisted of a discussion on the principles of targeting and delivering a message, and the second half consisted of interactive group and individual exercises. Given the proximity of the parliamentary elections, the Institute has reoriented its programs toward working with candidates and their teams.

On May 5, NDI conducted a training seminar for independent candidates. Participants were young people who have since formed two youth blocs: New Parliament and Young Azerbaijan – New Names. Similar to the regional party trainings, the sessions focused on developing a message. The participants in the May training program had not taken part in previous NDI seminars, so the information was new to them. The training was well received and the participants were extremely interactive, posing questions and asking for examples, which were easily accommodated given the small number of participants.

NDI began a more in-depth training program for parliamentary candidates at the end of June. From June 27-28, NDI conducted a training session for 17 of the Azadliq coalition's parliamentary candidates. The candidates were split into groups of eight and nine and received one day of training on campaign planning. While some were receptive to the content of the training, others were less so. To

make future training sessions more effective, the Institute will begin working with the candidates one-on-one to persuade them to reach out to the voters in their districts, and to demonstrate how to do this most effectively. NDI will also meet with party leaders and urge them to emphasize to their candidates the importance of campaigning effectively.

Consultations with Candidates and Party Leaders

NDI continued to hold regular consultations with party leaders from the Azadliq and YeS blocs to review the coalitions' activities and intentions for the parliamentary elections. During consultations held throughout the quarter, the Institute encouraged them to seek out colleagues who shared their values and coordinate their parliamentary campaigns, which would make the parties more competitive on election day. Largely as a result of NDI's efforts, three parties – ADP, Musavat, and APFP – formed a coalition to coordinate their parliamentary campaigns in 125 districts. NDI also encouraged them to begin selecting candidates as soon as possible, so they would have ample time to run a competitive campaign. The Azadliq coalition released a list of 34 parliamentary candidates in June, which the Institute has begun to train. The YeS coalition has not announced definitive plans to release their list. The leaders of YAP suggested that their candidate list would be complete by July, and were amenable to NDI's training plans for multi-party trainings in three regions.

The Institute continued to assess the potential of independent candidates this quarter. Most independent candidates have not officially announced their intent to run or the district in which they intend to run. Nevertheless, NDI consulted with a number of potential independent candidates, as well as those who will may run under the umbrella of a coalition, including: Arastun Orujlu on April 8; Asim Mollazade on May 4; Musa Suleymanov on June 21; Vugar Mammadov on June 22; Farahad Mammadov and Rustam Aliyev on June 23; and Nazim Imanov on June 22. Each discussed his plans for the parliamentary elections and some requested technical assistance in areas such as developing a campaign plan. The Institute will continue to invite these candidates to training sessions, and will consult with them as they request assistance.

Isa Gambar and Rasul Guliyev visited Washington, D.C. from April 11-15. NDI, in cooperation with the International Republican Institute (IRI) invited a variety of U.S. government officials, NGO and think tank leaders and members of the news media to hear Gambar and Kerimli outline their views and explain the coalition's goals for the upcoming election. NDI offers the same opportunity to all NGO and party activists visiting Washington. The Institute also consulted with Gambar and Guliyev to advise them on coalition building and the candidate selection process.

Domestic Election Monitoring

Every election in Azerbaijan over the last decade has lacked full transparency from precinct level election commissions up through the Central Election Commission (CEC). As part of an effort to document violations on and before election day, and to enhance the capability of the citizens of Azerbaijan to monitor their election process, NDI has begun to build the capacity of a domestic civic organization, the Election Monitoring Center (EMC), to conduct a nationwide election observation effort for the November parliamentary elections.

This quarter, NDI worked closely with EMC. In April, NDI began providing EMC with a small amount of funding to conduct citizens' forums to assess the organization's regional capacity. The forums were organized around the topic of free and fair elections and were conducted in Sumgayit on April 23, Ali-Bayramli on May 26, Khachmaz on May 30, Ganja on June 17, Gazakh on June 21, and Goychay on June 28. Approximately twenty people attended each forum. Discussion centered around the lack of opportunity for dialogue with the local executive authority, as well as the pressures experienced by observers and commission members during the 2003 presidential and 2004 municipal elections. NDI utilized these forums to determine EMC's recruiting capacity as well as to provide the organization with some advice on recruitment.

After each forum, NDI staff would conduct a short debriefing session with EMC leadership on how the forums could be improved. Over the course of the program, EMC learned to guide the discussions more effectively and was better able to challenge participants to devise solutions to the problems they identified in the election process. The forums also provided EMC with an opportunity to build relationships with local government officials. Despite the success of some of the forums, EMC continually encountered problems receiving permission from the local authorities to conduct their activities. EMC would receive permission only one to two days in advance of the planned event, which hampered their ability to recruit participants. In some cases, they never received permission and had to move the forums to another location.

In June, the Institute provided EMC with a domestic election monitoring expert to work with the organization on a plan for their domestic monitoring effort. Aleksandra Kuratko, who has worked closely with NDI's partner civic organizations in Croatia and Georgia, spent 10 days with EMC conducting a comprehensive assessment of the organization's capacity by meeting with the EMC board, regional coordinators, and coalition members. On June 24-25, Kuratko conducted training sessions with EMC board members to develop a set of guiding principles and improve EMC's communication and reporting procedures.

At the conclusion of her visit, Kuratko made recommendations to NDI and to EMC on how their work should progress over the next few months. She recommended that NDI work with EMC to develop a concrete plan for the elections, an election calendar and a training of trainers program. She also recommended that NDI train EMC to write objective and balanced reports for public distribution. In the coming months, Kuratko will return to Azerbaijan to assist EMC in the implementation of her recommendations. In the meantime, NDI is working closely with EMC board members to ensure their progress in developing an election plan and calendar, as well as a training of trainers program.

NDI recruited five civic activists from Azerbaijan to observe the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan on July 10. They took part in an effort organized by ENEMO to deploy 30 observers throughout Kyrgyzstan to monitor and report on the election process.

Women's Initiative

Women are largely underrepresented in government and political parties in Azerbaijan, and those that are politically active have long worked in isolation from one another. Many women have been trained to run for office, but there has been little dialogue between political parties and civic organizations aimed at ensuring women's representation. The Institute has been facilitating discussion on ways in which to increase women's participation. NDI's women's roundtables have provided a forum for members of political parties, civic organizations and government agencies to discuss how to make institutions and parties more inclusive for women.

On May 18, NDI held a women's roundtable entitled "Azerbaijan's Commitments to the International Community on Increasing Women's Participation" attended by 30 participants from NGOs, political parties, government offices and a number of press outlets. The roundtable featured Mominat Omerova, Vice-Chairperson of the State Women's Committee (SWC or the Committee) and Gulamhuseyn Alibayli, Member of Parliament (MP) from APFP. Omerova discussed the conventions to which Azerbaijan is a party that deal with women's participation and women's rights.

Much of the discussion centered around questions posed to Omerova about the government's implementation of commitments to increase women's participation. The participants' questions were primarily directed to Omerova, and were constructive and insightful. The women urged Omerova and the SWC to take a more active role in advocating for greater women's participation. Omerova agreed that the Committee should work with more NGOs and political parties on women's issues. She also agreed that society at large should have better access to SWC. Individuals from opposing political parties have a tendency to attack one another in Azerbaijan, such that constructive exchanges like the one at the women's roundtable are rare. The discussion demonstrated that women attending the roundtables are comfortable debating and discussing issues with women from opposing political parties or positions in society.

Baku-based Discussion Forum

Based on the need for greater dialogue on policy issues in Azerbaijan, NDI developed a program to promote dialogue and debate on important political issues among political parties, NGOs and government officials. On April 12, the Institute held its second policy discussion forum in Baku. The topic of the discussion was legal reform in light of a report on reforming the defense bar recently released by the American Bar Association/Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative (ABA/CEELI). ABA/CEELI's country director Lynn Sferrazza gave the keynote address.

Sferrazza began the discussion by asking the participants how the defense bar system could be improved. Participants were constructive, active, and focused on the topic. Nearly everyone offered some commentary. The discussion group engendered a lively debate between a pro-government MP and legal activists about ways to improve their efforts to advocate for reform. The lawyers acknowledged that perhaps they had not done an effective job educating members of parliament about the issue, pledging to broaden those efforts. Sferrazza, who has been intimately involved in discussions around improvements to the Law on Attorneys in Azerbaijan, described the discussion group as "one of the most substantive and productive I've

heard on the issue.” She attributed this to the fact that a number of political party representatives, NGO leaders, MPs and independents were in attendance, offering fresh viewpoints.

The forum elected five members to serve on a working group that subsequently prepared a written set of recommendations on the legal defense system. The working group prepared a package of proposals on behalf of the forum, which were released on May 19. NDI distributed the recommendations to the presidential apparatus, the media, political parties, the parliament and the Collegium of Advocates. The recommendations received positive news coverage. On May 20, Turan News Agency reported that President Aliyev instructed the presidential administration to propose amendments to the law on Advocates so it is in compliance with international standards. During a June 16-17 conference hosted by ABA/CEELI on legal reform, the policy group’s recommendations were widely distributed and cited. Azer Taghiyev of the Collegium of Advocates (CA) announced at the conference that the law on Advocates would be addressed and mechanisms to improve admission would be put in place.

Meetings with International Organizations

The Institute has begun meeting with representatives of international organizations in Baku to coordinate monitoring and training efforts in advance of the parliamentary elections. During the quarter, NDI met with the Open Society Institute, the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Eurasia Foundation, UNIFEM, and the British Embassy. NDI will continue to ensure that the Institute is apprised of the work of international organizations in Azerbaijan so as not to duplicate efforts.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Objective: To promote dialogue among political parties, NGOs and government officials aimed at the adoption and implementation of reform legislation and policies.

The Baku discussion program achieved this objective this quarter. Following the publication of the policy group’s recommendations, the president and government leaders announced their intent to reform the defense bar and the law on advocates. While many other organizations have been working on the issue of legal reform, NDI’s forum was unique, as the participants represented a broad cross-section of society that included political parties and NGOs. The participants at the roundtable provided valuable perspective to a debate that previously was being conducted through a narrow circle of lawyers and international organizations.

Objective: Create a cadre of regional party members skilled in the areas of campaigning and local party practices.

Despite the government’s harassment of opposition parties, NDI was able to conduct some limited training for regional political party members. The training exposed the party members to modern campaign techniques. The Institute thus worked to develop a cadre of regional leaders with campaign skills.

Objective: To encourage women to be more involved in decision making processes in Azerbaijan.

The May 18 women's roundtable partially achieved this objective. Through constructive discussion and debate, as well as questions posed to a member of parliament, the women were able to interact and discuss what could be done to bring Azerbaijan's policies involving women in line with international standards. While this may not have resulted in concrete action, it provided the women with a forum to constructively address policy issues with a government official who could potentially influence the process. In future roundtables, NDI must be careful to direct the discussion toward more concrete actions, and to include more men.

V. EVALUATION

While NDI is still unable to conduct a full range of programming in the regions due to government restrictions, the Institute was able to conduct some programs this quarter. The Institute's activities were primarily aimed at promoting a genuinely democratic electoral process by building the capacity of EMC, and working with party leaders and potential candidates and their teams in Baku. EMC has made positive steps toward organizing a nationwide monitoring effort. NDI will continue to assist the organization actively in the coming months. The Institute's consistent message to political parties encouraging them to coordinate with like-minded parties appears to have been successful, with the emergence of coalitions that intend to coordinate their parliamentary campaigns. The Institute also positively assesses the women's roundtable and the outcome of the Baku discussion group as promoting constructive policy debate in Azerbaijan.

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

Now that some parties' plans for election campaigns have been clarified, the Institute will work to train candidates and candidate teams. Once other election blocs, including YAP, announce their candidates and where those candidates intend to run, NDI will begin training and consulting with them. The Institute will continue to reach out to the government and YAP as much as possible, while conducting programming for other parties and independents who are seeking NDI's assistance.

NDI will hold the next policy discussion forum in Baku on July 23. The group will bring together NGOs, political party representatives, and government officials to facilitate discussion on economic policy in light of the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.

The Institute plans to build on the success of its women's program by continuing to hold roundtables on involving women in the political process.

NDI will work with EMC in the coming months to build the organization's capacity to conduct a successful election monitoring effort in November.

VII. PERSONNEL

Christine Quirk continued as office director and Sasha Bruce continued as resident program officer. In NDI's Washington, D.C. office, Thomas Barry served as senior program manager and Chandra Luczak worked as program officer.